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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 3630
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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1088
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RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 2664
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000546

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SUBJECT: POLLING DATA SHOWS THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF PM SINGH
IS SECURELY IN PLACE

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: Despite domestic setbacks, two recent polls indicate that the Congress-dominated UPA remains popular with the Indian voter due to sustained economic growth, a popular foreign policy plank and the enduring appeal of the Congress Party and the Gandhi family brand. Congress President Sonia Gandhi's popularity is at an all-time high, with a clear majority preferring her as Prime Minister over Manmohan Singh. Despite the poll ratings, which suggest that Congress could escape its reliance on the Left, the party is not willing to risk a mid-term poll and national elections are not likely until the UPA term expires in 2009. In this regard, Congress has learned from the BJP's hubris in calling early elections in 2004. The opposition BJP's poor performance in the polls reflects its deep divisions and leadership disarray. End Summary.

12. (U) On January 23rd the television channel CNN-IBN and the "Hindustan Times" released the results of their nation wide survey of 15,141 respondents spread across 28 states and Delhi conducted by the Delhi based Center for the Study of Developing Societies, a leading social science research institution. The poll documented that a clear majority (34%) of the respondents preferred the current UPA government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to the previous NDA government(24%). Respondents also preferred Congress President Sonia Gandhi for Prime Minister over Manmohan Singh (24% versus 9%). Former PM AB Vajpayee was a close second to Sonia, with 20%. This is the first time we can recall since her entry into politics that a survey showed Sonia to be a leading favorite for the country's highest political office.

13. (U) The survey predicts that if a parliamentary election were held today, the Congress-led UPA would win 274 seats in the 542 member Lok Sabha (an increase of 49 seats from its

current 225). Such an outcome would provide the UPA with a slim absolute majority and allow it to rule without the support of the troublesome Left parties. The NDA would come in a poor second, with just 150 (down 25 from its current 175 seats.) The survey also predicted that Congress would win parliamentary majorities in Punjab, Rajasthan, Chattisgarh and Karnataka, all states where it lost badly to the NDA in the 2004 national elections. The poll also indicated that Congress was well on its way to revival in its former stronghold of Uttar Pradesh (UP).

¶4. (U) While the Congress party was evidently pleased with the outcome of the survey, it was quick to dismiss speculation that it was planning to call early parliamentary elections, with Congress Minister of Science and Technology Kapil Sibal declaring that there would be no elections before the UPA completed its five year term in 2009. This demonstrates that Congress has learned from the BJP's mistaken hubris in calling an early election in 2004. The opposition BJP rejected the survey because of the small size of its sample.

¶5. (U) A separate poll by the BJP-supporting "India Today" replicated much of the CNN/IBN/Hindustan Times Poll results, although the margin in favor of Congress and the UPA was smaller. In that poll, Congress slipped marginally from 32% to 30% as the party best qualified to rule the nation. Poll respondents indicated that if an election were held today the UPA could win up to 242 seats. The "India Today" poll showed the NDA remaining within its current range with between 170-180 seats. Those polled by "India Today" also showed a strong preference for Sonia Gandhi over Manmohan Singh for

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Prime Minister (27 percent versus 15 percent). As in the other poll, the BJP's AB Vajpayee came in a close second to Sonia Gandhi with 24%. Despite his third place showing, Manmohan Singh's performance rating remained strong, with 35 percent stating his performance as "good" and 35 percent "average" and only 12 percent "poor."

Comment - UPA Sitting Pretty

¶6. (C) While no survey conducted in India in the past few years has accurately captured the true sentiments of the Indian voter, these polls are consistent with our own analysis and what we are hearing from our contacts. Although the UPA faces domestic problems (septel) it retains a firm hold on power in New Delhi, due to a rapidly growing economy, a successful foreign policy and the enduring charisma attached to the ruling Congress and the Gandhi family. The two polls disagreed on whether the UPA would be able to capture an absolute majority in mid-term polls. Although Congress would like to rule without the support of the Left Front (LF), there is enough uncertainty in the polling data to convince Congress to exercise caution and not call for new elections. The weakness of the opposition underlies the UPA's strong showing. The BJP has been convulsed with internal problems since its defeat in the 2004 national elections, many in the country view it as a party in disarray, and it is currently unable to mount a serious challenge to the Congress party. It is a reflection on the party's bankruptcy that Former PM Vajpayee remains the BJP's most popular figure. His departure from electoral politics will further undercut the party's electoral performance.

¶7. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>)
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